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Career Planning

Starting a New Job? Take Control of Your Onboarding

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Summary. If you want to excel in your new job, you can't rely on your company's onboarding process to prepare you. You need to take control of your integration. Start by cultivating connections up, down, and across. Spending time early on to figure out who the influencers are in relation to your role, and getting to know them face-to-face, can pay big dividends down the road. Ask your boss questions to better understand how you will be evaluated and to identify early wins. Look for projects that will motivate the team, can be achieved quickly, and deliver operational or financial results. It's also important to build trust. Be honest about the challenges you see. close

When Liz was offered a job as a product manager at a growing biotech firm, she was ecstatic. She had spent considerable time on her job search, found a company and a position that felt like a perfect fit, nailed her interviews, and negotiated smartly. But once Liz had both feet in the door and began onboarding in her first month on the job, she suddenly felt less confident. She sensed that she wasn't fitting in with the culture, was unsure who she should build relationships with, and felt unclear about what her actual role was. Liz began to wonder if she was even qualified for this job that she had worked so hard to land.

As an executive coach, I've seen a lot of leaders like Liz (not her real name) — in fact, Liz herself was my client. In working with her on the job transition, it became clear that while she was excited about starting the new job, her onboarding process was not going well. Unfortunately, this is common. According to research by McKinsey, up to half of new-leader transitions fail within two years.

The fact is that if you want to excel in a new job, you can't rely on your company's onboarding process to prepare you. You need to take control of your integration. Here's how.

Cultivate connections up, down, and across. As a new hire, one distinct disadvantage you face is your limited internal network. It's typical for new employees to initially place most of their focus on the relationships with their direct manager and those they manage, but others across the organization can be just as critical in influencing your career.

Lateral relationships will vary by industry, but let's take one example. A senior director of marketing reports to an executive with broader responsibilities, who in turn reports to the global VP of marketing. The senior director needs to understand how her product line contributes to the overall marketing strategy, as well as the goals of her peer groups in this chain. Making a point of getting to know not only her direct manager but those above and across will provide a deeper understanding of the organization's priorities.

Spending time early on to figure out who the key influencers are in relation to your role, and getting to know them face-to-face, can pay big dividends down the road. If you were hired for an externally facing role, for example, your stakeholders should

include customers, business partners, suppliers, and industry opinion leaders. As you identify these people, here are some questions to ask them:

- What are your most critical business issues over the next one to two years?
- How can our departments partner to achieve that plan?
- What has previously worked well between our departments that we should continue?
- What should we do differently to be more effective?
- How can we communicate to ensure optimal collaboration?
- What politics should I understand as my unit tries to accomplish these goals?
- Who else do you think I should talk with? Can you connect me to them?

Understand your role and how you will be evaluated.

A common mistake I've seen executives make in new professional or leadership situations is assuming they know what their top goals should be and how best to communicate with their new manager and leadership team.

I recall an extroverted client in an academic institution who told me that he would walk unannounced into the office of his highly introverted new boss whenever he wanted to discuss something. That created an immediate dissonance in communication styles. It sounds like a small thing, but in the end his contract at the company was not renewed. During your first month in a company, take time to ask your boss these questions:

- How do you prefer to give and receive feedback and be kept informed?
- What are your most important goals for the year, and how do they fit into the company's strategic objectives?
- What are the two to three most critical accomplishments I need to achieve within a year, and how will they be measured?
- What should I accomplish in the next six months?
- In what specific ways can I help you succeed?

Identify early wins. After investing in hours of interviews with you, your hiring manager will likely feel convinced that she hired the best person for the job, and may confer a status of invincibility on you in your initial weeks or months with the company. As a new employee, you can take advantage of this “halo effect” by identifying and delivering on early wins. According to Michael

Watkins, you must choose these projects carefully. The goal isn't to become a hero by tackling the most ambitious problem imaginable. Instead, it's to select an initial success that motivates the team, can be achieved quickly, and delivers operational or financial results. It's also essential for new leaders to keep the culture of the company in mind when designing the execution of the early win, relying on seasoned team members to help identify what will be seen as a success and what won't be.

Build trust with your team. If you're coming on board as the new boss, keep in mind that most people feel anxious when reporting to a new manager. They may be hesitant to buy in until they get to know you and your intentions for their role. This reality can hamper your leadership effectiveness if you have no plan to address it. To help people understand your agenda, begin your tenure by laying out your vision clearly and enthusiastically, along with a road map of the team goals you seek to accomplish. Encourage the team to offer their own insights and perspectives. And be honest about the challenges you're worried about. These actions can help you make a positive first impression, which is a crucial step toward building trust and respect.

With a little planning and forethought, you can take control of your onboarding to accelerate your learning curve and build the type of lasting relationships that can facilitate your success.

Susan Peppercorn is an executive career transition coach and speaker. She is the author of *Ditch Your Inner Critic at Work: Evidence-Based Strategies to Thrive in Your Career*. Numerous publications including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, the Boston Globe, and SELF Magazine have tapped her for career advice. You can download her free Career Fit Self-Assessment and 25 Steps to a Successful Career Transition.

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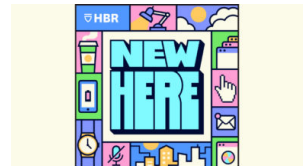
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